

[The Family of an Automobile Worker]

Mrs. Sam [?]. Whelchel

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The Family of an Automobile Worker

A few months ago the Chevrolet plant in Atlanta was shut down and all the workers were idle for several weeks. But now the labor troubles are over, and the plant is working five days a week. The change in the outlook of the employee was typified in the expression of Mr. Whelchel when he came into the labor union office with a broad grin on his face, to get the lunch that his oldest son had brought in a basket. He recognized one of the interviewers, who had formerly taught a class among the automobile workers. They exchanged quick, hearty greetings before Mr. Whelchel hurried into the back of the office with his lunch. The interviewer asked if it would be all right for him to go down and interview his wife.

"Sure, go ahead."

The Whelchels live on a side street near the automobile plant, in a brown frame house of seven rooms - seven small rooms, as we found when we made a tour of the house. The lot is narrow but deep, stretching back almost two hundred feet to form a pasture for the cow which supplies the family with milk. The front yard is very small, but sodded with bermuda grass. The houses around the Whelchel's are similar in style and size, all frame structures, with small front yards planted in grass, and a few shrubs here and there.

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Mrs. Whelchel was sitting on the porch, with her youngest child on her lap. She was combing and curling its hair. When we told her what we wanted she said that we had come to the wrong place, for she didn't think that she could tell us much that would be interesting. However, she began talking anyway, and told us that she was chairman of the home arts committee of the Women's Auxiliary. The home arts class, she said, was then working on some "gypsy glaze" pictures. She showed them to us later, and we found them to be designs painted on glass in transparent colors, with tinfoil on the back to reflect the light. She showed them with pride and sincere interest, and was genuinely pleased when we evidenced some enthusiasm over a design of a [sombre?] looking ship sailing a black ocean. She regarded her work critically, and remarked of one of the pictures, "I haven't ever been satisfied with the way that bird in the middle looks. I'll have to do it over." Impartially considered, the pictures were crude and gaudy, inharmonious mixtures of bright reds, yellows, and greens; but it was obvious that they were to Mrs. Whechel an outlet for the creative impulse. She did not draw the designs freehand, she said, but traced them from stencils the teacher of the class supplied. They included a ship, butterflies, and flowers, and parrots.

She showed us over the house, first explaining, however, that it was not all cleaned up. There was a mixture cleanliness and untidiness. The plaster of the walls and ceilings was badly cracked, giving an air of dilapidation, as did the mantel, with its cracked mirror, and the empty aquarium upon it. The living room had many cheap and incongruous knickknacks 3 here and there. The large calendar which hung on one wall of the dining room helped the gaudy 'gypsy glaze' pictures to make the walls look like the displays at the midway of the fair. The front bedroom was a jumble of bedclothes, an old bedstead - which Mrs. Whelchel explained was the only piece of furniture that Mr. Whelchel had brought from his mother's home - a box full of books, and trash. It was evident, however, that some degree of order and cleanliness was usually maintained, for the colored girl who lived in one of the back rooms had just mopped the floors. All the floors were covered with linoleum. "Sam

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wanted to get regular rugs,” said Mrs. Whelchel, “but I said, no, we'd better get linoleum on account of the children, and they're so much easier to keep clean.”

Mrs. Whelchel had first told us that we had better come back for the interview when she was not so busy, and up to now had been merely extending to us a sort of preliminary hospitality. But there didn't seem to be a time when she would not be busy, after some minutes of trying to arrange a future date, she decided that now was as good a time as any. We sat down in the living room, and she took up some crocheting so that she might work with her hands while she talked. She was making some coasters for iced-tea glasses.

One of the interviewers, seeing some wandering [jew?] in a hanging vase, casually asked if it were not bad luck to have wandering jew in the house. “I never heard of it,” she said, “but did you ever hear that it was bad luck to have goldfish in the house? There's a lady down the street from me that 4 won't have any because she believes it is bad luck.” Mrs. Whelchel, however, did not share this superstition, but planned to fill her empty aquarium and get more fish.

We had both noticed a large atlas that sat on a table in a corner of the living room, and asked about it. “I was hoping you would ask about that,” she said, obviously proud of it. “We got that with a set of books we bought for the children. Sam bought the Book of Knowledge Encyclopedia, and we could either get that or a bookcase. We took the atlas, because I had always wanted one.” She carried us into the front bedroom where the books were still in the box in which they were shipped. On examination they proved to have bad print and worse reproductions of photographs and other illustrations. We asked how much they cost. “Eighty dollars,” she replied. “We pay four dollars a month.” It was impossible for the interviewers to refrain from observing mentally that the books were not worth that much, even with the atlas, which was almost as cheap looking as the “gypsy glaze” pictures. She had bought the books for the children, she said, and this led us to ask what plans she and her husband had for their children's education. “It looks like now we

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will be doing good if we can put them through high school. Then if any of them shows any talent for anything special, we'll try to send them to college."

Neither Mrs. Whelchel nor her husband went to college, and Mr. Whelchel did not finish high school. "I graduated 5 from Piedmont High School at Demorest, Georgia," she said. Don't get it mixed up with Piedmont College," she cautioned, "I wish it was, but it was Piedmont High School." She was proud of the fact that she had had five more points than was necessary when she graduated, even though she had attended the school only two years. She had attended another high school for one year before going to Piedmont, however. From high school she went to a business college in Athens, Georgia, and took a general course.

Mr. Whelchel's various jobs include being a shipping clerk, refinishing furniture for the Western Union Telegraph Company, and working as a lineman for the Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company. He is now on the unloading platform of the Chevrolet Company, having been until a few months ago a buffer, which, Mrs. Whelchel explained, meant that he polished off the scratches from the fenders of new cars. He now works forty hours a week on the unloading platform, making eighty cents an hour.

"No, we'll never get rich at that," she remonstrated, "but it's all right while it lasts. But two weeks off will just ruin you."

We were interrupted by one of the little boys coming in with an orange which he wanted his mother to peel for him. It was Bobby, who had broken his arm a few days before and now carried it in a sling. He is the middle child, aged four. Philip, the oldest, is six years old, and he is the one who carries lunch to his father each day. Tommy is the baby, only two years old. Mrs. Whelchel fixed the orange, while Bobby 6 stood at her side, very shy in the presence of the visitors, and whispered something in her ear. In a few minutes Philip came in, also very shy, and walked timidly into the back part of the house. "Hello, Doll," greeted Mrs. Whelchel, but the little fellow was too timid to reply where the strangers could

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overhear. It was evident that Mrs. Whelchel was fond of all her children, and we were surprised that they were so very timid. During the whole time we were there they did not speak to us, though we tried to get a rise out of them by making comments about the toy mechanical train and asking them to explain how it worked.

Someone knocked on the door, and Mrs. Whelchel got up and paid the insurance collector. "We have two policies on each child," she said. "We let them lapse a while back, "but we've renewed them." One of the policies on each child is with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and includes a free nursing service. "Yes, it's right good," she answered our query, "but when one of my children gets sick I don't wait for the nurse. I send for the doctor right then." The nurse attended Mrs. Whelchel when she returned from the hospital after her last confinement, and also helped when the youngest child had the measles some weeks ago.

"No, we haven't got a car. We had one up to the time we moved over here. We were living in a house up there near the school then, and paying fifteen dollars a month rent. The landlady said we could have the house for a year for that much, but in about six months she told us that in two weeks the rent would be raised to twenty-two fifty." Both Mrs. Whelchel and her husband were angry at this breach of contract, and decided to move rather than pay more rent. They wanted to buy a home, but Mrs. Whelchel knew that they could not afford both a home and a car. "'It's either a home or a car,'" I said to Sam," Mrs. Whelchel related. "Sam sat there a while, and said, 'I can't live in the car. I'll let the car go and get me a house we can sleep in.' So we found this house and bought it because the terms was reasonable, and it was close to Sam's work." When they moved into their new home it needed much work done on it. The front yard was a series of red gullies. There was no bathroom, and the only toilet was in a shack connected to the back of the house. They fell to and [sodded?] the yard, built a concrete-floored bathroom with shower, and painted the woodwork on the inside. Recently a new sleeping porch has been added, the work being done by Mrs. Whelchel's father. The whole family sleeps on this porch.

She carried us back through the house to see the sleeping porch, of which she was very proud. On the way through the kitchen she showed us her electric ironer and new gas stove. "A while back," she said, "when Sam was laid off for so long, he wanted to let the ironer go, but I just couldn't see it, with the two little ones coming on. We managed to hold on to everything." While we were examining the new stream-lined kitchen stove Mrs. Whelchel opened the oven door and gave us some /cup cakes which she had just baked. She gave us also a glass of milk each. She had told us before that she kept a cow. "Sam can't quite see havin' her, but we use so much milk I told him it was cheaper. Two quarts a day pays for the feed."

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We asked if she ever sold any milk. "I have sold some, but we use it all now." She also showed us a calf in the backyard, which she said they would kill soon.

The sleeping porch was not so much a porch as we had imagined, having no more windows than an ordinary bedroom.

In the living room we had seen a gas heater, and asked her now if that was the only kind of heat the had. "That's all," she replied. "We have three heaters, and an automatic water heater that holds thirty gallons, and a gas refrigerator." We wondered if this were not expensive. "Cheapest heat we've ever had," she said. "Our gas bill was five dollars and two cents last month, and the coldest month last year was only eleven dollars. The other people around here burn about a ton of coal a month, and we figure this is cheaper.

There are two boarders with the Whelchels. "Sam kind of lets me do what I want to with the board money," she said, "but I usually pay bills with it." Besides this extra income from boarders, they sometimes sell milk or chickens. "We raised thirty-five chickens once, and sold enough of them to pay for the cost and the feed, and had the rest clear. We ate about twenty of them ourselves." Although Mrs. Whelchel does not sew for others, she does her

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own sewing. "I sew it all," she said. "Make clothes for the children and for myself too." It was apparent that the dress she was wearing was home-made.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Whelchel were reared on farms in the northeast section of Georgia. Mr. Whelchel worked in all the surrounding states before finally settling down. "I always said that he went all over the country first, and then come back home to get him a wife," commented Mrs. Whelchel. They are both between thirty and thirty-five years old.